

Homily – 27-09-20 – Pentecost 17 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7 Psalm 78:1-4, 11-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

On Palm Sunday each year we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and being welcomed by the crowd as a king. We remember people shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' but, often forget how dangerous that would have been in a little country occupied by the Roman Imperial army. For, in the crowd's adulation there was the potential for Roman authority to be questioned; for the Palestinian puppet king's authority to be doubted; and for the religious authority of both Sadducees and Pharisees to be challenged.

We know which of these three authorities Jesus focussed upon because after arriving in Jerusalem he went straight to the Temple to pray. When he found it compromised we understand that he turned over the tables of the money-changers, drove out the animals intended for sacrifice, and roared at the Temple police that they had turned a house of prayer into a business. I wonder what the buzz would have been in conversations throughout Jerusalem that evening? At the very least I think people would have discussed what Jesus might do next?

This weekend's Gospel describes what happened the next day! While Jesus was teaching in the Temple, the chief priests and the elders came to him with a 'Please explain!' demand. These religious leaders were utterly convinced that they knew what God wanted, that they had God given authority to interpret the Torah, and anyone who suggested alternative views... was dangerous. They claimed the authority that God had given Moses, maybe fifteen hundred years before Jesus... and asked whose authority he claimed?

In that wonderful Rabbinic way of teaching Jesus responded, with a question of his own. He asked whether God had given authority to John the Baptist to preach repentance, or whether it was his own. The question left the chief priests and elders in a tricky space because John the Baptist had challenged them but had been very popular with the crowd. So, they fudged a response, and replied that they did not know. Jesus followed this up with a hard-hitting parable that imagined a man who asked each of his sons to work in his vineyard. The first said that he would not, but then went; while the second said that he would go, but did not. 'Which of them did the right thing?' Jesus asked, and the chief priests and elders had no choice but to say... that it was the one who went to the vineyard.

To ensure that there was no doubt about his meaning Jesus explained that prostitutes and tax-collectors, the very ones that the chief priests and elders wrote off, recognised the call of God in the ministry of John the Baptist. It would have offended the chief priests and elders to have this affirmed so publicly, and probably alienated those who had some sympathy for him and his ministry. A line had been crossed... so, clearly he had to go!

Five hundred years ago it could be argued that the Roman Catholic authorities in Europe were like the chief priests and elders of this weekend's Gospel. They were utterly convinced that they were the prime authority for interpreting and applying sacred Scripture, and even claimed to be God's authority on earth.

In 1516 Roman Catholic authorities sent a Dominican friar, called Johan Tetzel, to Germany to raise money through the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were based on the interesting idea that the souls of those people who were not virtuous, went to a place of punishment called purgatory. It was

suggested then by the Catholic Church that those who cared for the person could reduce the time their loved one spent in purgatory by giving the Church money! A saying attributed to Tetzel at the time suggested that, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

A German priest and scholar called Martin Luther disagreed with the sale of indulgences because he believed, from his reading of Scripture, that only God could grant forgiveness. So, in October 1517 he wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg to protest, and in this letter he asked some tough questions. An example is that he asked why the Pope wanted to build the Basilica of St Peter with the money of the poor, when he was arguably the wealthiest person on earth?

It offended the Roman Catholic authorities who refused to accept the truth of what was being said. More than this, what had been said and done so publicly alienated and threatened them. A line had been crossed... so, clearly he also had to go! And go he did, but his thoughts and teaching, made widely available through the recently invented printing press, helped to catalyse what became known as the European Reformation.

We can look back at the conflict with Jewish authorities two thousand years ago and wonder why they didn't accept the uncomfortable truth that Jesus articulated. Or, look back at the conflict with Roman Catholic authorities five hundred years ago and wonder why they didn't accept the uncomfortable truth that Luther offered... but, hindsight is a beautiful thing! The uncomfortable reality is that there seems to be an inclination within all religious institutions to be self-serving, and to be resistant to the possibility of reform and renewal.

So, what about the context of our time and faith community? What would Jesus say to the religious leadership of our own Anglican denomination: within the global Communion; the National Church; our Diocese of Southern Queensland; or our local Parish? Are there doctrines and religious practices that need review, reform, or renewal... and how might this happen?

We could also helpfully ask who the 'tax-collectors and prostitutes' are in our time? And by this, I mean who are those that our religious doctrine rejects, condemns, or excludes?

I think it's worth wrestling with these questions and taking them into prayer.

So, let's pray now...

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and for your love.

Through your Spirit help us as individuals, and as a Church,
to be guided and formed by your Spirit:

Open our eyes to recognise where we have become self-serving,

And give us the courage and will to bring about life-giving change.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us all to God's kingdom,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen